

THE GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY // VOL. 105 NO. 3 SUMMER 2021



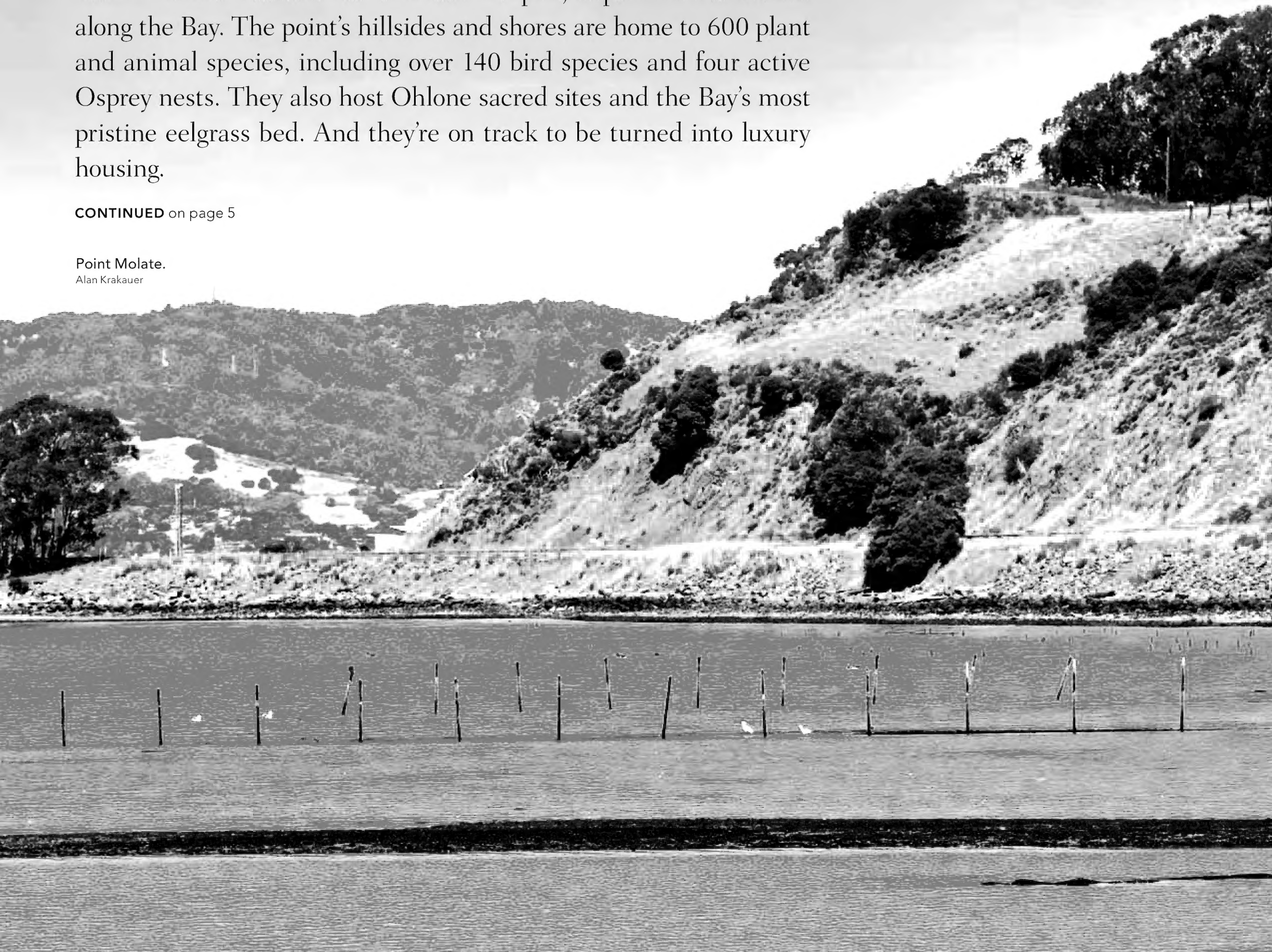
SAVE POINT MOLATE, A NATURAL TREASURE

BY ILANA DEBARE

Point Molate in North Richmond may be the most important San Francisco Bay development battle you've never heard of. These 413 acres include the last undeveloped, unprotected headland along the Bay. The point's hillsides and shores are home to 600 plant and animal species, including over 140 bird species and four active Osprey nests. They also host Ohlone sacred sites and the Bay's most pristine eelgrass bed. And they're on track to be turned into luxury housing.

CONTINUED on page 5

Point Molate.
Alan Krakauer





Glenn Phillips (right) visits Point Molate Beach with Golden Gate Audubon member Tony Brake.

THE TIME IS NOW TO PRESERVE OPEN SPACE

BY GLENN PHILLIPS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

I moved east for college in 1986 and returned with my family to the East Bay in 2020. During that time, the Bay Area changed dramatically. The population grew by over two million, tech industries came to dominate the local economy, and houses spread over hillsides once reserved for cattle and wildlife. At the same time, some places changed very little or even changed for the better. Natural habitats are now being nurtured around India Basin in San Francisco, restoration of the “New Marsh” in Martin

Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline provides improved habitat for wetland birds, and expansion of Sibley Volcanic Regional Preserve in Oakland and Orinda protects a crucial wildlife corridor along the East Bay Hills. Thousands of all-electric vehicles drive our roadways, solar panels cover acres of rooftops, and the Altamont wind farm, once visible out the window of my childhood home, has shrunk.

But no new state parks have opened in over a decade, even as park use increased

by orders of magnitude. I see more people outdoors in our parks than ever before—a trend that is unlikely to reverse even as our economy opens up again. As a teen, I rarely encountered another hiker once I got past the first mile from the trailhead in almost any California park, even iconic ones like Yosemite. Now trailhead parking lots are overflowing. During Golden Gate Audubon’s recent Christmas-in-May Bird Count, I passed over forty hikers, a dozen mountain bikers, and a foursome on horseback during my four-mile bird walk.

Last October, Governor Newsom announced his ambitious 30 x 30 initiative: By 2030, to set aside 30 percent of state lands primarily for the conservation of biodiversity and nature-based solutions for climate change. It could not be more timely. This coming year will mark critical milestones in the protection—or loss—of important Bay Area open spaces including Point Molate in Richmond, Tesla Park between Livermore and Tracy, the N3 Cattle Ranch near Livermore, and over 550 acres of wetlands slated for luxury housing alongside the Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge in Newark. We must hold our elected officials accountable and see that our landscape is protected in ways that are equitable and reparative—not just of the ecological systems, but also of the human systems.

Returning to the Bay Area after forty years, I’m thrilled to join with you, our valued Golden Gate Audubon members, to continue our fight to protect the Bay Area’s lands for future generations of birds and people.

NEWS BRIEFS

Travel with GGAS in 2022-23

Satisfy your pent-up craving for birding travel with us. Choose from expert-led birding trips to Oaxaca, Chile, Ohio, Kentucky, Uganda, Brazil, and Namibia/Botswana in 2022. Plus we’re starting to add trips for 2023, including a Birding and Culture in Southern Portugal trip. Travel with GGAS is a great way to experience new parts of the world while adding to both your life list and your friend list. Dates and detailed itineraries at goldengateaudubon.org/travel-with-ggas.

Birdathon 2021—Success Despite Covid

Birdathon couldn’t include in-person field trips this year, but we made up for it with ten Virtual Field Trips, a first-ever Christmas-in-May Bird Count timed to coincide with eBird’s Global Big Day, and an online auction. Over 400 people watched the Virtual Field Trips and 140 joined the Christmas-in-May count. Top fundraisers were Susan MacWhorter, Dan Harris, and the San Leandro Bay and Claremont/Temescal count teams. Overall we raised more than \$53,000. Thank you, everyone!

Many Ways to Connect

The Gull comes out quarterly, but so much happens between issues! Contact ggas@goldengateaudubon.org to receive our monthly email newsletters that list upcoming field trips and other events. Join our friendly and informal email discussion group at groups.io/g/GGAS-Chat. Or subscribe to our blog, *Golden Gate Birder*, for inspirational weekly essays about local birding and conservation issues: goldengateaudubon.org/subscribe. And you can also follow us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.



At left, Martin Luther King, Jr. Regional Shoreline; above, Ridgway's Rail. Photos courtesy Rick Lewis.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. REGIONAL SHORELINE: BIRDING HOTSPOT

BY BLAKE EDGAR

LOCATION

Swan Way near
Dootlittle Drive,
Oakland

*GGAS
succeeded
50 years
ago in
protecting
Arrowhead
Marsh as
a refuge.*

Wedged between Interstate 880 and Oakland International Airport along San Leandro Bay, Martin Luther King, Jr. Regional Shoreline protects a remnant of a once-extensive tidal marsh that maintains a population of endangered Ridgway's Rails and serves many shorebirds and water birds.

More than 200 avian species have been reported here on eBird. For birders, the primary attraction is often 50-acre Arrowhead Marsh, the park's centerpiece and a central location for many Golden Gate Audubon Society activities, from Eco-Education and adult education field trips to long-term restoration efforts.

After much of the marsh here was lost to make way for the airport and other development, GGAS succeeded 50 years ago in protecting Arrowhead Marsh as a refuge. For a broad perspective on the aptly named marsh, visit the viewing deck at the observation tower beside the parking lot.

Then go out on the dock that extends over pickleweed and cordgrass to seek some secretive denizens, like the furtive and rare Ridgway's Rail, which is restricted to tidal and brackish marshes rimming San Francisco Bay. You may hear its distinctive territorial clapping call, but setting eyes on the bird is more challenging.

Your odds improve if your trip coincides with a high tide, when the rails have fewer places to hide. During one king tide, I felt fortunate to observe a flying Virginia Rail, a paddling Sora, and four Ridgway's Rails, including one that walked right beside the dock. Such encounters can make the existence of this urban oasis, hemmed in by bland business parks, seem like a minor miracle.

Opposite Arrowhead Marsh is New Marsh, 73 acres of restored wetland that resulted from litigation by GGAS against the Port of Oakland. You can see New Marsh from the first bridge just past the parking lot or explore along its eastern edge from San Leandro Creek Trail West.

For a longer jaunt, cross over San Leandro and Elmhurst Creeks and continue for a little over half a mile to Garretson Point. This spot is known for offering a trifecta of teal in winter, when you can find Cinnamon, Blue-winged, and Green-winged species. Continue another mile along the Damon Marsh Trail, spotting shorebirds in the mudflats. If you become inspired to lend this park a helping hand, GGAS sponsors restoration work sessions on the third Saturday of each month: Sign up through the Volunteer page of our website.

Have a favorite birding site you'd like to share? Contact idebare@goldengateaudubon.org.

GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON LAUNCHES CLIMATE WATCH SURVEYS

BY DAVID ROBINSON

National Audubon's landmark 2018 report brought the dangers of climate change home to birders. The sobering news was that nearly two-thirds of North American birds—389 species—are at risk if global temperatures rise by three degrees Celsius. But the report offered hope too: Limiting temperature rise to 1.5°C would help over three-fourths of the most vulnerable species.

Spurred by this and other studies, Golden Gate Audubon Society has begun to focus on climate change in addition to our longstanding local conservation work. Many of our most important efforts will involve advocacy. Our latest initiative, though, involves community science: Taking part in National Audubon's twice-yearly Climate Watch.

Climate Watch aims to document species' responses to climate change by having volunteers in the field look for birds where Audubon's climate models project they should or shouldn't be. National Audubon chose a dozen target species: Eastern, Mountain, and Western Bluebird; Brown-headed, Pygmy, Red-breasted, and White-breasted Nuthatch; American and Lesser Goldfinch; Eastern and Spotted Towhee; and Painted Bunting. All of these are easily identified, charismatic, geographically widespread, and predicted to be strongly impacted by climate change.

As a new member of the GGAS Board of Directors, I took responsibility for organizing our first foray into Climate Watch. Alan Bade—a GGAS member and Mount Diablo Audubon board member who participated in Climate Watch last winter—filled me in on the basics and connected me with our regional coordinator for further training. I in turn recruited two of my fellow Master Birding students, Bryan Flaig and Anderson Yun, as GGAS's Climate Watch co-coordinators.

Together we mobilized fifteen GGAS members to undertake bird surveys between May 15th and June 15th. Our prime target was the Spotted Towhee (the focus of ten surveys), although we also



Rick Lewis

Spotted Towhee.

focused at least one survey on each of the other locally occurring target species.

The most challenging part was planning each survey route, which had to include 12 locations at least 200 meters apart where the target species would likely be found. The goal is to return to these specific locations twice a year throughout the 2020s and document changes in the target population.

As *The Gull* went to press, GGAS was on track to conduct almost 20 population surveys across the Bay Area. Many thanks to the participants, mentors, and coordinators who made this happen!

Propelled by the success of this first venture into Climate Watch, we'll be recruiting and training more birders to take part in the upcoming winter round, January 15 to February 15, 2022. The global nature of climate change can feel overwhelming, but providing field data to shape conservation strategies is both personally empowering and scientifically useful. If you'd like to take part in the winter survey, email me at climate@goldengateaudubon.org.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Restore Habitat—SF and Oakland

Our volunteer habitat restoration events are up and running again! Join a monthly work session at MLK Jr. Shoreline in Oakland or at Golden Gate Park, Pier 94, Treasure Island, and Heron's Head Park in San Francisco. Advance registration and masks required. See goldengateaudubon.org/volunteer.

Field Trips Resume

As the Bay Area reopens from the Covid shutdown, we're excited to resume in-person field trips. To protect everyone's health, trip size is currently limited and advance registration required. Check out the calendar of upcoming trips at goldengateaudubon.org/fieldtrips. See you (and your mask) in the field!

Virtual Field Trips

Our series of ten Virtual Field Trips during Birdathon got rave reviews. If you missed them, video recordings are available online. Call our office at (510) 843-2222 on Mondays through Thursdays with a \$15-per-trip credit card payment. See a list of all the trips at goldengateaudubon.org/birdathon-main-page/birdathon-field-trips.

Fall Classes

Our fall lineup of birding classes includes new offerings on migration and finding rarities, plus introductory classes and classes on shorebirds, diving birds, and birding by ear. Instructional sessions via Zoom with in-person field trips. Check our website and e-newsletters in July for details.

POINT MOLATE from page 1

The City of Richmond has contracted with a Southern California developer to build over 1,400 upscale townhouses at Point Molate, which occupies 1.4 miles of Bay shoreline north of the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge.

Richmond citizens voted down a previous plan to turn Point Molate into a casino. The current City Council majority opposes the luxury-housing plan. The Point Molate Alliance, a grassroots citizens group, has been fighting the development for years.

Yet this ill-conceived scheme barrels on—fueled by outdated notions of shoreline management and a series of convoluted, constricting legal contracts.

Point Molate originally held Ohlone settlements and burial sites, a 19th century Chinese shrimping community, and a pre-Prohibition wine distribution facility built like a red brick castle. It later became a naval fuel depot until the nationwide base closures of the 1990s.

The San Francisco Presidio, with wealthy and influential neighbors, was decommissioned in that same wave and became a world-class public park, part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Point Molate—located in the working-class, majority-nonwhite city of Richmond—faced a very different fate.

City leaders contracted with a developer to build a casino there. When Richmond voters rejected the casino in a 2010 referen-



Lech Naumovich

These slopes are slated for luxury townhomes.

The City of Richmond has contracted with a developer to build over 1,400 upscale townhouses at Point Molate.

dum, the developer sued the city for \$750 million in alleged lost profits. So the city then contracted with a Southern California developer to build luxury housing, agreeing to split proceeds from the sale with the disgruntled casino developer.

The Point Molate Alliance filed lawsuits challenging both the Environmental Impact Report for the project and the secrecy with which the deal was made. Meanwhile, the 2020 election ushered in a new City Council majority that's skeptical of the development plan. But city attorneys say they are legally bound to move forward, and in June sent the plan to the regional Bay Conservation and Development Commission for approval.

The plan is flawed from multiple perspectives. Safety: With only one two-lane road into the area, it would be a nightmare evacuating thousands of residents during a wildfire or explosion at the Chevron refinery directly next door. Finances: Tax revenues from housing sales may not cover the costs of necessary infrastructure, such as a new police and fire substation. Economic and racial justice: The developer plans to price condos at \$1.2 million in a city where the median income is just \$64,000. This land

belongs to Richmond, but Richmond's residents won't benefit from it.

And environment.

The developer claims that 70 percent of the land will remain open space, but they're counting parking lots and spaces between buildings: Point Molate Alliance says the real figure will be about 40 percent. Hill-side grassland and scrub habitat will be lost. Runoff, construction, and ferries will destroy its renowned eelgrass beds, which shelter spawning fish, reduce erosion, sequester carbon, and provide seed plants for Bay restoration.

The Point Molate Alliance has a better idea: Make the area part of the East Bay Regional Park District, with historic structures turned into a conference center, sports fields for Richmond's youth, and hiking trails for all.

It's not too late! You can help. Learn more at ptmolatealliance.org. Email the Bay Conservation and Development Commission at cody.aichele@bcd.ca.gov urging rejection of the housing plan and adoption of the Community Alternative. Or you can get involved through our East Bay Conservation Committee: Email EBCC@goldengateaudubon.org.



Jeff Peterson

Osprey at Point Molate.

DONATIONS

Thank you for joining our donor community.

Donations from March 1, 2021 through May 31, 2021.

Thank you to all our Spring 2021 donors, including everyone who took part in Birdathon! Your generosity allows us to protect Bay Area birds, restore the habitat they need, and introduce children and adults to the wonders of nature.

GOLDEN EAGLE (\$1000 and above)

Agerter Judd Fund of the East Bay Community Foundation, Chris and Gary Bard, Patricia Greene, Philip & Sally Kipper, March Conservation Fund, Jill Spangenberg, Yemaya Fund, Geraldine Young

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Ilana DeBare, Sandra Donnell, Pauline Fong, Dan Harris, Diane Ichiyasu, Vivian Kremer, Jeffery Martin, Susan Palo, Maryann Rainey, Anne Rowe, Eric Schroeder, Tan Suwannukul, Jane Torbet

LEAST TERN (\$250 to \$499)

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Please know that we work hard to ensure the accuracy of this list. If your name has been omitted or misspelled, let us know at 510.843.2222.

LISTEN TO HER SING

NATHAN PIEPLOW

Only male birds sing, right? Wrong! In fact, this widespread notion has a lot more to do with human cultural and geographic biases than it has to do with nature. In this talk, Nathan Pieplow explores the often-overlooked songs of female birds. You'll hear the pair duets of meadowlarks and blackbirds, the musical songs of female cardinals and orioles, and the distinctive song of the female Canyon Wren. In which species do females actually sing more often than males? How do you know when you're listening to a female Blue Jay? And where did we even get this crazy idea that only male birds sing?

Nathan Pieplow is author of *The Peterson Field Guide to Bird Sounds*, the most comprehensive guide to the sounds of North American birds. He lives in Boulder, Colorado, where he teaches writing and rhetoric at the University of Colorado and helped develop the Colorado Birding Trail.

ONLINE

Thursday, July 15
7 p.m. Via Zoom



Bob Gunderson

Canyon Wren.

ISLANDS AND AVIAN EVOLUTION

BOB LEWIS

Because of their geographic isolation, birds that arrive on islands evolve separately from their parent group and may become new species. But that isolation also makes them vulnerable to threats like hurricanes, volcanoes, rising seas, and introduced predator species. Although over 80 percent of bird species live on continents, 92 percent of extinctions since 1500 have been on islands. Join us to view some marvelous island species and learn what we can do to protect them.

Bob Lewis, a longtime birding instructor and bird photographer, is a board member of the Farallon Islands Foundation, created to foster life on islands.

ONLINE

Thursday, August 19
7 pm Via Zoom



Bob Lewis

Bornean Bristlehead.

PURPLE MARTINS IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY: GOING, GOING, GONE?

DAN AIROLA

Purple Martins have been declining in California due to a variety of factors such as habitat loss, competition with European Starlings, and dwindling food supply due to neonicotinoid insecticide use. Since the 1990s, Dan Airola has worked to conserve the last Central Valley population of Purple Martins, which nest in elevated freeways and overpasses in Sacramento. He'll describe strategies to protect this species and help it recover.

Dan Airola is a wildlife biologist and ornithologist with more than 40 years of experience in Northern California bird conservation. He is a Director and Conservation Chair of the Central Valley Bird Club.

ONLINE

Thursday, September 16
7 pm Via Zoom



Lisa Alvarez

Purple Martins.

ROSTER

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MISSION STATEMENT

Golden Gate Audubon Society engages people to experience the wonder of birds and to translate that wonder into actions which protect native bird populations and their habitats.

ABOUT GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY
The Golden Gate Audubon Society was founded January 25, 1917. Golden Gate Audubon Supporting Membership is \$35 per year. You can join or renew on the website or through our Berkeley office.

The Gull is published four times per year. Special third-class postage paid in Oakland, CA. Send address changes to the office promptly. The post office does not forward *The Gull*.

Learn about upcoming Golden Gate Audubon events every month! Send your name and email address to ggas@goldengateaudubon.org to receive our monthly e-newsletters.

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This issue of *The Gull* was published July 2021.

Our monthly Speaker Series is free and online! See goldengateaudubon.org for Zoom link.

www.goldengateaudubon.org

 The Gull is printed with soy-based inks on chlorine-free paper, 30% postconsumer waste content.

3 Birding Hotspot: MLK Shoreline

Rails, shorebirds, and waterbirds thrive at Arrowhead Marsh and the adjacent shoreline near Oakland Airport.

4 Climate Watch

Join our new community science initiative to track the effects of climate change on local bird populations.

7 Speaker Series

Learn about female birdsong, islands and avian evolution, and Purple Martins in the Central Valley.

BACKYARD BIRDER



Bob Lewis

White-tailed Kites hand off prey during courtship.

WHITE-TAILED KITE

BY GAIL KURTZ

Hike along a Bay Area marsh or field and you're likely to spy a White-tailed Kite hovering in mid-air with wings flapping and head cocked down, a behavior so characteristic of this bird it's known as "kiting." Hovering up to 80 feet off the ground to scan for prey, the kite drops for the kill with talons out. Given its white head, tail, and breast, black shoulders and wingtips, and light gray back, it can appear gull-like in flight, but its falcon-like shape and behavior distinguish it.

These graceful birds inhabit grasslands, open woodlands, marshes,

and cultivated fields. In North America, they're found primarily in California, Texas, Florida, Oregon, and Washington. They also populate Central and South America, breeding as far south as Chile and Argentina. Not known to migrate, White-tailed Kites appear to be nomadic and to follow their main food supply (voles and house mice) when scarcity occurs.

Highly social, these kites roost communally during the non-breeding season, with up to 100 birds clustering in a stand of trees. They perform spectacular mid-air courtship displays in which males offer prey to females, who approach and turn upside-down to grasp the offering. Pairs stay together during the breeding season and sometimes pair up in successive seasons. While not particularly territorial, White-tailed Kites may challenge invading kites, locking talons and tumbling through the air to pull apart before the ground, a behavior known as "grappling."

Nearly extinct in the U.S. in the 1930s due to hunting, egg collection, and habitat loss, White-tailed Kites became fully protected in 1957 and their numbers rebounded. Their conservation status is now Least Concern, although Partners in Flight states that populations declined 36 percent between 1970 and 2014. That said, these kites currently have the largest distribution in their recorded history, and it may still be expanding.

California is home to the most White-tailed Kites in North America. Locally, birders have spotted them nesting in the Berkeley Marina, roosting in Pt. Reyes, and grappling at Coyote Hills Regional Park. Share your White-tailed Kite sightings with us at gaildkurtz@gmail.com and we'll post them on our blog! We'd like to hear your stories, learn from your experience, and unleash our community's power to understand and honor one of our area's most elegant raptors.